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ABSTRACT

Considering that some feminist critics have recently been approaching composition theory from a preconceived feminist perspective, the issue of maintaining an analytical bias while conducting research is once more emerging. By imposing an analytical model on a body of data, scholars run the risk of ignoring conclusions or focusing on those which corroborate their positions. Students in a freshman composition course at Lawrence Technological University were asked to write responses to Ernest Hemingway's story, "Hills Like White Elephants," the same method and story used in an earlier study by the feminist composition scholar Elizabeth Flynn. Unlike Flynn's results, male students did not "dominate" the text any more than females. The readings by males and females, however, did differ to some extent, and students' responses demonstrate a wide range of reading styles. Some frustration and anger was shown as students tried to fill in the "gaps" presented by this story. Hemingway never explicitly tells the reader that the man and woman are discussing their need for an abortion, forcing the reader to work hard to draw this conclusion. Midterm essay responses show that student response, both male and female, draws strongly on the teacher's explication. Researchers should focus on how students read both with and without the teacher's help. After two decades of reader-response analysis, perhaps the introduction of narrative theory into pedagogy is an idea whose time has come. (HB)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

WHAT DO WE TEACH AND HOW DO WE TEACH IT?

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What Do We Teach and Why Do We Teach It?

In the February 1990 issue of College Composition and Communication Elizabeth Flynn discusses her background as a scholar in order to justify her research approach. She tells of her interest in feminist literary criticism developed "as a graduate student," and of her subsequent hiring as a "composition and reading specialist." Admitting that "Connections between composition theory and feminist literary theory were ...difficult" ("Composing" 84), Ms. Flynn defends her approach in answer to an anonymous reviewer who, after reading her 1988 article entitled, "Composing as a Woman," declared that it was "not research" ("Composing" 83). That essay, she claims was "aimed at composition specialists... and it attempts to persuade them that feminist theory has a bearing on composition studies" ("Composing" 86). She ends the February 1990 article by telling us that "The word 'research' derives from the French 'researche' and suggests a quest, an investigation" ("Composing" 88). Its "methods," she says, "are meant to enable discovery, not to impede it" ("Composing" 88-89).

She admits as well, that the incorporation of "feminist inquiry" will "alter... the field of composition studies...call into question its assumptions and procedures" ("Composing" 89).

This declaration seems a strange beginning to research. Is coming to a body of data with a pre-conceived ideology productive to research? Although Flynn denies the claim that what she is doing is "ethonography" ("Composing" 84), I'm not sure that I can agree with her. A quest that preconceives a gender orthadoxy is certainly something other than research. She admits to a goal. "If we can establish difference," she says, "then we have taken a first step toward establishing dominance" ("Composing" 88). Will establishing dominance provide us with a useful agenda? Perhaps. However, I wonder if maintaining an analytical bias and conducting research are not at times antithetical. Are we on a quest for what we don't know, or for what we already know? In imposing an analytic model on a body of data, don't we run the risk of ignoring conclusions that may be more meaningful than the ones that corroborate our political positions?

One reason I have been attracted to Elizabeth Flynn's reader-response analyses is that we both teach at similar institutions, she at Michigan Technological University and I at Lawrence Technological University, also in Michigan. We both teach in departments of Humanities and our students major in technical or scientific fields.

On one occasion, therefore, I thought it might be useful to try to corroborate the results of one of her studies by approximating the same procedure on my own students. The particular study to which I will refer was first described in an article entitled "Gender and Reading" in College English 45

(1983). The students in this study were enrolled in a freshman composition course at Michigan Technological University in the spring quarter, 1980. They were asked to write their immediate responses to three different stories during the first twenty minutes of class before the stories were discussed (Flynn "Gender" 1283). Flynn, then, makes some judgments on the basis of her student responses. I did the same with responses of my students in January, 1990. The responses were, in both cases, to Hemingway's story, "Hills Like White Elephants."

To make my investigation as even as possible, I tried to approximate Flynn's directions to her students telling them "a wide range of responses was possible, including summarizing the stories, analyzing them, or relating them to their own experience"("Gender" 1271). I also suggested they might raise questions, show frustration, hypothesize results. Since my students were reading a different anthology, they did not have a chance to consult the study questions that Flynn tells us "followed each story in the Norton anthology," where she says, "a question indicated to them [her students] that Jig and the man were discussing an abortion"("Gender" 1284). Deprived of this essential clue, my students, male and female alike, focused on the discussion between the man and woman (called a "girl" by Hemingway) in the text pondering the purpose of their argument. Some thought it was over whether or not they should make love for the first time. (6 out of 24 in a class of 9 women and 15 men, and 2 in another class of 18, 5 women and 13 men)

In this essay Flynn speaks of three kinds of readers, those

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who dominate the text, those who are submissive before it, and those who interact in a "productive" way to "achieve(s) a balance of empathy and judgment"("Gender" 1273). According to Flynn, those who dominate the text deny its power/ability/influence. They turn aside from it, not allowing it to penetrate their "previously established norms"("Gender" 1272). "Not surprisingly," she says of her analysis, "the preponderance of responses by both women and men were submissive. Because students were encountering the stories for the first time," she hypothesizes, "they had difficulty stepping back from the texts in order to interpret them"("Gender" 1274). However, she does find differences in responses of men and women. These differences she attributes to "dominance" in "some of the men's responses...but," she says, "no such pattern was evident in responses written by women"("Gender" 1275).

Flynn talks of male students with a "tendency toward domination" as those who "judged characters without empathazing with them" or who "detached themselves from the emotional content of the text" ("Gender"1275). One example of lack of empathy read, "The story stank. It was boring and didn't end with any main idea." Another read, "My impression of the story was that it wasn't a story at all. It was just a short conversation between two people" ("Gender" 1278).

Those who dominated the text in my classes were also angry. "Today's story, 'Hills Like White Elephants'," one female responded, "brings many thoughts to mind. The first thought is that the story is extremely dumb and not worth reading." A

corollary male response was, "The whole conversation between the man and woman is nothing but nonsense and pertains to nothing that shows any importance to the reader." These dominant responses, while not exclusively male, were however responses of capable students, students whom I knew from a previous course in Freshman Composition. However, in my sampling the 'tendency toward domination' was neither male nor female and, indeed, was often was the response of the brighter student of whatever sex. In my sampling some dominant responses led to cogent analyses as well. Although some students became hostile because they could not penetrate the 'problem,' the discussion of abortion, the hostility did not always prevent them from achieving an interesting evaluation of the story. Students, male and female alike, usually confident and complacent about their abilities to 'analyze' literature were particularly angry when faced with this story. "Although the basic principles of the story could be easily understood," one woman wrote, "the overall picture left me screaming, What? It is easy to understand the plot centers around a man manipulating a woman into making a decision," she continued, proclaiming some control over the text but not able to discern what she assumed to be the core of the discussion.

Whereas I did not find that male students dominated the text more than females, I did find some differences between male and female readers. Upon further consideration, the woman who made the reply that the story was "extremely dumb" began to change her mind. "Upon more thought," she claimed, "some

purposeful ideas spring up." She, therefore, in the space of her reply began to interact with the text, still without quite making sense of the subject under discussion. She ended by saying, "Although the story still seems rather stupid, understanding of why it might have been written comes a little easier. The story seems like it was meant to make the reader think, whether about the characters or himself." No similar concessions were made by men. The men who began by a dominating rejection of the story, stuck by their initial impressions.

All students who came up with the deduction that abortion was the subject of the discussion were quite pleased with themselves, as if this deduction was the reason behind my assigning such a paper in the first place. The story was a puzzle they were to solve and when they did, they were satisfied and proceeded to tell me how they derived their 'answer." Male responses ranged from the highly dominant, "The characters are easy to understand. The man and the girl are talking about having an abortion," to what Flynn calls the 'interactive'. "We sense the confrontation is over a pregnancy." One man said, "I think that the operation may be an abortion because the characters repeatedly say that the operation is simple." He went on in what I assume Flynn would say is an 'interactive' response, "I believe the guy really doesn't want the responsibility that goes along with having and raising a child." Another triumphantly explained his process of discovery, "There are only so many things that he could be alluding to --things that a man can do to a woman -- that are reversible by an

operation. A key factor in making this deduction," he went on, "is knowing the characters are careful and wistful 'live for the moment' type of people." One male student hypothesized that the girl may be having a "hysterectomy or something."

Women's responses in my sampling varied from dominant to interactive to submissive, as did men's, but a response was usually directed toward deducing the nature of the problem under discussion in the story. Each had her own proof. "In my opinion," a dominant response read, "Hills Like White Elephants" is about a woman's controversy in deciding whether or not to have an abortion. The reason is," she continued, "because the woman's health is not in jeopardy but her relationship with the man is." Another was worried about how much the woman in Hemingway's story was drinking, "because if she is pregnant that could hurt the child." Then she confessed, "I don't know but that might be the operation being discussed." A third woman talked of "clues" the story gave, the "tension" between them,"their decision 'to have a fine time,'" or, as she translated the phrase, "to make the best of their situation." Another 'clue' was the recitation of saying how "simple" the operation would be. "This makes me believe," a woman explained, "that it is 'simple' and she will be conscious during it."

The readings by males and females differed, seemingly in accordance with their empathy or emphasis on the character of their same sex. So male queries centered around whether or not one "accepted responsiblity," about what men "did" to women. and even over the nature of this so-called women's trouble, a

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"hysterectomy or something," Women, understandingly more knowledgeable about the procedure, noted that it was a "simple" operation, through which one would be "conscious," had a more contemporary concern over "drinking" and pregnancy, and even. in one case, evinced the cruel logic that, "the women's health is not in jeopardy but her relationship with the man is." Certainly these responses to the riddle were often gender specific but they do not seem to be distinguished on a dominant/submissive axis.

Both male and female students could be unsubmissive and distancing. "It is possible," one woman wrote, "to infer different meaning into the conversation each time the story is read." and "They face a situation in which they act normally. When surgery is involved, there is always fear." Indeed, many of these were the 'best' students who, without knowing what the discussion was about, understood the story quite well. Empathy was not always a necessity as indicated in the following "interactive" negative response:

> The basic idea of the story, as I see it, is the way we communicate. Hemingway hides his point in the small plot of the 'operation' (another point of frustration to me). The author is trying to show that we all speak with hidden messages which the other party must decode.

This male student then ended by saying, "I feel that this idea is interesting but makes for boring reading." He, thus, was able to analyze meaning and implication without either knowing the subject of the central discussion or even liking the story.

His antagonistic remarks and lack of empathy with the characters didn't close off meaning for him.

Women were the more confessional. "I realized how dumb it is to be really quiet and agree with someone. I have been guilty of that a few times." one woman claimed, and another admitted, "I have had personal experience in being in the 'manipulated' corner." These were the submissive responses Flynn also found where the students were so identified with the actions of the characters, they could not distance themselves to see or interpret the narrative.

If the story made women confess, it caused some men to become defensive. "He loved this girl and didn't want to leave her. He wanted to take her with him." was one analysis. Another said, "The girl's attitude was rather argumentative and unreasonable in nature...she is stubborn and almost belligerant." And, "The whole story centers around," one man argued, "whether or not the man will go through with this thing."

Men, particularly, assumed the protagonists were afraid of controversy. Although one woman said, "When they realize conversation will get them no further along, it was best just to end the conversation," a response acknowledging the benefit of silence was usually a male-interactive comment. "An argument may occur and possibly result in the destruction of their relationship," one man worried. Another concluded, "The main point is that unnecessary talking is better off left unsaid than to be said." And another argued, "The point is little space and

time apart can be beneficial in a relationship and make it work.

Male and female students alike pondered the title and what most saw as its lack of relevance, as if the title ought to give the ultimate clue. Some who thought the argument was over whether to have sex or not then saw the hills as symbols of virginity or purity, thereby finding correlative symbolic proof of their deduction. These students were reading as they have been taught to read in the manner of what Stanley Fish calls our "interpretive community." And Fish tells us, "interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned" (172). What is interesting in this context is that the interpretive strategies here were used to corroberate a misreading, that the man and woman in the narrative were postulating whether or not to have sex, which in turn raises other questions about how we usually teach literature and how students appropriate our methods. We've taught students to search out 'symbols' to echo their analysis. However, the students who did so in this reading lacked the success our method promises.

What are we to make of all these readings. Student readers did assume there was 'meaning' here if only because of Hemingway's authorship. "I have never read any of Hemingway's other stories," a male reader confessed, "but I feel this one could use a little more drama and/or action." Few students did not seem to want to know what the story 'meant,' Those who dominated by dismissing the story were disturbed because they could not penetrate the text as Flynn, too, argues.

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> This student's way of dealing with the difficulty of the text was to dismiss it. The response is characteristically dominant in that it defends one-way projection as an appropriate reading strategy and thereby renders the text voiceless. ("Gender" 1275)

However, in my sampling insight into the story and its complexity was not necessarily accomplished with interaction at all. Interaction leading to confessionalism bypassed the text. Sympathy did not guarantee understanding nor did antipathy guarantee opacity. Women were more likely to change their minds during the course of their discussion, and in that instance they were perhaps shown to be as Flynn states, "receptive to texts in that they make an attempt to understand them before making a judgment on them"("Gender" 1283). That attempt, in my sampling did not guarantee results. The best analyses were accomplished by the brighter students whether they figured out the problem of the central discussion or not, whether they liked the story or not. Whether they were male or female did have some bearing on what they said in their analyses, but had little bearing on their dominant or submissive stance, or their success in interpreting the story.

According to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, "The hermeneutic aspect of reading consists in detecting an enigma (a gap), searching for clues, forming hypotheses, trying to choose among them and (more often than not) constructing one finalized hypothesis" (128). This process describes what my students had been doing. Then why were they so upset? The "gap," Rimmon-Kenan says, can

either be "temporary, i.e. filled -in at some point in the text... or permanent, i.e. remain open even after the text has come to an end." And, "the reader cannot know whether a gap is temporary or permanent" because Rimmon-Kenan insists, "this uncertainty is the basis of the dynamics of reading" (128). Would our students be better served if they were aware of Rimmon-Kenan's analysis? Ought we tell our students that all stories have "gaps," that they, in reading, will be trying to fill in these gaps, but that sometimes the answer (gap) is "never given" (Rimmon-Kenan 129)?

Rimmon-Kenan also makes a distinction between gaps in the text (the words written) and gaps in the story (the chronology the reader constructs). Thus sometimes, she argues, we can fill in the story because we don't notice the gap in the text or we account for it in some way. We read by "a continuous process of forming hypotheses, reinforcing them, developing them, modifying them, sometimes replacing them by others" (Rimmon-Kenan 121). But our students are unaware that this process is universally applicable. We project to our students a quasi-dictatorial presence in our classrooms. We know the story, the riddle, that they have to decipher. We cover up how we know what we know, the processes we have been through in our reading. Instead, in our class discussion, we tell students of symbols and allusions as if we are in cahoots with the author in ways to block perception.

"The text," Rimmon-Kenan points out, "preshapes a certain competence to be brought by the reader from the outside," and

"in the course of reading... develops in the reader a specific competence needed to come to grips with it, often inducing him to change his previous conceptions and modify his outlook" (118). If Rimmon-Kenan is correct, this process seems to coincide with the kind of reading Flynn attributes to an "interactive" reader and which she found was primarily a female response. As the better students in my sampling, regardless of their sex, responded in this fashion, perhaps it is previous experience in reading itself that has much to do with competance of interpretation. Perhaps Flynn's female students had more experience reading, thus were more attuned to what Rimmon-Kenan called "forming hypotheses," "modifiying," and "replacing them" and, therefore, were more "interactive."

> Mieke Bal, when discussing story aspects, says,
>
> When a character appears for the first time, we do not yet know very much about it. The qualities that are implied in the first presentation are not all 'grasped' by the reader. (85)

In other words, it is natural not to know much about the characters when we first encounter them in fiction. She goes on to say that "repition" is "an important principle of the construction of the image of a character." The "piling up of data," and "relations with others: helps us "determine the image of character" (85 - 86).

A "relation" with an "other" is the only clue Hemingway gives us in his brief story to determine his characters' images. No wonder we have difficulty interpreting these characters; we

must not only construct them solely from their relation with each other, but we must also infer that relation from their cryptic dialogue.

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer.

We are not told, for example, that they are lovers caught in a crucial juncture of their relationship, but we must read the dialogue slowly to infer that probability as they talk of their choice of beverage and the scenery, avoiding the read issue on their minds. Interestingly, Linda Wagner tells us that in an earlier version of the story, no mention of anything "significant" was made between the characters. Of this early version Wagner says, "We never know it is an abortion story, and Hemingway abandons it" (241).

A narrative, according to Bal, can "appear objective" when "events are not presented from the point of view of the characters" (106). Thus Hemingway's story seems to be a reportorial account of a conversation between someone the narrator calls the "girl" and a male figure termed an "American." Indeed, because of this terminology, many of my students thought the girl was Spanish, since the story takes place in a Spanish-speaking country. As the male figure is called a "man" and the female a "girl," the students also assumed that the male was older and of a different nationality. Bal. explaining narrative, asserts "Objects, landscapes, events,

in short all the elements are focalized... Because of this fact alone, we are presented with a certain, far from innocent, interpretation of the elements." But, she asserts, "The degree to which the focalizer points out its interpretative activities and makes them explicit also varies" (106). Hence singling out the woman as "the girl" and the man as "an American" might make the man seem older. Hence also the interest of the students in the title taken from the girl, Jig's, remark about the landscape,

> "They look like white elephants," she said.
>
> "I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

One's perception that the narrator is focalizing the hills through the eyes of the central character gives that statement validity and weight. We hypothesize that it is either preferable or peculiar to see hills like "white elephants" although we don't quite know which nor what the phrase means at this stage of our reading. Indeed Mary Dell Fletcher in an analysis of the significance of the landscape puts parentheses around her comment "(whatever it means)" (17) when she mentions Jig's comment that the hills "look like white elephants." In the completed version of the story, Wagner says,

> Although the characters are introduced with apparent objectivity, 'the American and the girl with him,' Hemingway's sympathy is clearly with the girl. (240)

What should we be telling our students about these "far from innocent interpretation (s) of the elements?" My colleague, a feminist, schooled in traditional Hemingway motifs

read some criticism herself before her class discussion, including the articles cited by Wagner, Kobler, and Fletcher. She pointed out to her classes that according to Linda Wagner, a feminine hero, this time, was exhibiting Hemingway's classic "grace under pressure" (240). The landscape with hills on one side of the railroad tracks and barren landscape on the other represented, she had her students see, two ways of life, fertility and rootlessnes, the female, of course, preferring the first and the male the second (Fletcher 16 - 18).

In an answer to an essay question on a midterm, most of my colleague's students seemed to accept this dicotomy. However she also introduced another idea, that the beaded curtain, separating the seating area in the bar from the outside of the cafe, represented the rosary. As one might suppose, this connection was not as readily accepted.

"I think that the curtain symbolized nothing," one male student ended his essay defiantly,

> It was just something in the story and Hemingway didn't mean anything by it. Although it was mentioned alot I just think that the curtain was used to set the scene and make the story more interesting. I don't think it had any significance.

Some students elaborated on the interpretation of the curtain as a potent source of power, "The symbol of the curtain would be like the rosary," one male claimed. "Every time Jig touched it, was like saying the rosary. She was asking God for help in her decision." Another man claimed, "The beaded curtain

symbolizes the rosary and is a reminder to the woman of her (my underlining) immoral act." Some students, mostly women, did not mention the rosary but did focus on the beaded curtain. "The girl touches the beads and talks about them," one female wrote, "signifying she wants to keep the baby. The man, on the other hand, passes right through the beads which is saying he does not want anything to do with the baby." A male response claimed, "The beads represents their ruthlessness and the baby. When the girl touched the curtain, the guy ignored her. He will do the same with the baby." Kobler says,

> Whatever we call the bead curtain, by not impinging directly upon the consciousness of the man and by being more important to the woman, it reflects their attitudes toward the never named central issue of the story: the abortion. Neither the curtain nor the abortion is important to him. Neither will obstruct his happy progress through life. (7)

Obviously both male and female responses to my colleague's essay question are remarkably like the criticism she read in preparation for teaching this story.

Whereas most of my students focused on the hills as 'symbolic' of something, none mentioned the curtain. My colleague argues that her students' responses compared with mine illustrate that students need teaching. I'm not so sure. Should we be trying to fill in all reading gaps with our own or others' interpretive hypotheses?

My colleague's students certainly felt that they had

mastered the story. For them gaps were nonexistent. However I was most interested in the varied interests to the curtain-as-rosary symbol. Her essay question read, "Give your interpretation of 'Hills Like White Elephants.' (You may want to include your position on the question of who is being manipulated in the story; the significance of the landscape; or what the curtain symbolizes.)" Although all her students responded similarly to the first two parts of the question (the man was manipulating the girl, the landscape was divided into the barren and the fertile), bringing the curtain into focus seemed to generate some individuality and passion to their responses.

My colleague gave her students an account of what Bal would call the "focalization" of an "object," in her case two objects, the curtain as well as the landscape, but what has been the result? Have her students now become members of Fish's "interpretive community?" Will they be more capable of interpreting the next text? Will they become, as Flynn would have it, more "interactive?" Or will the next text's 'gaps' be something they feel they must await a teacher's expertise to crack.

Should we encourage students to try interpretation on their own, encourage psychological identification with characters in narrative, introduce provacative interpretations? Or should we, in the manner of narrative scholars like Bal and Rimmon-Kenan, demystify narrative, show its formulaic properties? All questions warrant further study. We need to see how students

read with our help and without our help. Perhaps, too, we ought to evaluate what kinds of help we might give. Hiding theoretical hypotheses and fostering interpretive strategies leads to contentment and closure but will it lead to increased enthusiasm and joy in reading? Will it foster our students' interest in reading more? Will studying male and female responses to texts lead us to discover how students read and improve reading or do we, in this practice, ghettoize student responses into non-productive categories?

Even Monica Wittig now confesses, "At this point maybe the dialectical method that I have admired so much can do very little for us" (9). She now questions her colleagues who seek to claim "alterity... under all of its forms: Jewish, Black, Red, Yellow, Female, Homosexual, Crazy)"(10). She speaks of "possibility: and "potentiality" in its philosophic context where she says, "the Other cannot essentially <u>be</u> different from the One, it <u>is</u> the Same,..."(9). Are we raising productive issues in our research? No doubt it is interesting, anthropologically, to see how female and male readers respond to literary texts, (or how Jewish, Black, Red, Yellow, Homosexual, or Crazy people respond). But does this research advance the cause of literacy?

We have had two decades of reader-response analysis. Perhaps, now, introducing narrative theory into pedagogy may be an idea whose time has come. Whatever we decide to do in the classroom however, maybe we ought to investigate the word 'research' and as Elizabeth Flynn proposes, make it "enable

discover, not...impede it" (Composing" 89).

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